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State of the City

story by Anna Hausmann

What is one to make of Buffalo Mayor Anthony Masiello's recent State of the City address and of his relentless, almost oppressive, optimism, regarding the city's prospects?

Not that I mean to be a naysayer, God forbid, when the Buffalo News has banished any negativity with their year-long Buffalo-boosting campaign—"we're talkin' proud" updated for Generation Next. (As if negative thoughts alone have gotten us into our current sucking-mud quagmire.)

But happy thoughts alone aren't going to be enough to address some of the more intractable problems we face, such as relentless budget deficits, dysfunctional schools, a DOA regionalism plan, and an utter lack of leadership.

Not to discount the power of positive thinking. We can see it at work in the current downtown housing boom. While all the other developers sat on the sidelines waiting for someone else to jump into the pool first, once someone did—that someone being Bernie Oblatz, whose successful renovation of an old rail terminal into gorgeous upscale lofts became the tipping point for downtown's residential renaissance—the move to develop downtown has gathered momentum like a runaway train.

This might be an example of being in the right place at the right time. Certainly, as anyone even vaguely paying attention to current trends can tell you, Buffalo was overdue for a gold rush to rehab its old industrial buildings into residences to meet the growing demand for a hip, urban lifestyle. It's a trend that's been making its way through every Rust Belt city since at least the early 1990s.

But big obstacles to economic health remain, and any mention of them was conspicuously absent from the mayor's address. The lunch crowd that gathered to hear the mayor's vision was pretty well-heeled—business people, developers, Rotarians (the talk was hosted by Working for Downtown and by the Rotary Club). There weren't many representatives of groups who aren't doing quite well already.

And I guess that's my main complaint with this year's State of the City



City Hall.
Photo by Kim Miers

assessment. What the mayor calls vision is mostly just holding up a mirror: “Look at all of us, aren’t we doing well?” Or, worse yet, a mirror held up to the audience: “Look at what all of you have accomplished.”

Which makes his view of the city less consequential than the views of some of the other folks in the city who have been working hard to make progress happen. Rather than sit around and wait for leadership from city hall, neighborhood organizations and community activists have been making headway against the seemingly intractable inertia that has gripped this city since big industry pulled out. Though the mayor’s speech focused almost exclusively on big development projects, it is the small, incremental steps being made in neighborhood after neighborhood that have been improving quality of life and making communities thrive here.

Talk to Tim Tielman, for instance, the executive director of the Campaign for Greater Buffalo History, Architecture, and Culture, and he’ll tell you the state of the city is getting better all the time, thanks in part to community preservationists who—in previous years—stopped developers from pulling down the buildings now being rehabbed.

Ten years ago, all the elected officials wanted to wipe out the buildings around Washington Street for a new convention center, but now they’re all on the rehab bandwagon, in part because they have seen the huge demand for sophisticated, urban living. “Same thing for the other downtown areas,” Tielman explains. “Larry Quinn wanted to build the new arena on the Electric and Flower districts, sites of great new developments. Then he wanted to pave the Cobblestone District into a big parking lot. Now we have \$15 million worth of housing, commercial, and retail space in the works for that area. It just validates what preservation experts been saying for years, that people want to live in unique, historic buildings that are architecturally rich and restored. Preservation is economic development.”

Another perspective is of those living in the neighborhoods, those struggling to raise the quality of life in the city. Nancy Freeland, executive director of VOICE-Buffalo, a coalition of congregations in the city and suburbs whose goal is to organize citizens into agents of change at the local and regional level, also sees the state of the city as improving. “There are problems,” she says, “but there’s been progress, too, and it does help to be positive about the city.”

Freeland notes that the state of the city needs to be measured in more than just dollars and downtown development projects. “It’s good to have downtown development, but the neighborhoods are so important. The East Side is in dire need of redevelopment. We need to be focusing on issues such as safety, health care, increasing the skill levels of our population, and building on the assets we have.”

VOICE-Buffalo has been instrumental in helping citizens to force the city to put a rodent control program in place, leading to the introduction of the blue garbage totes, and is currently working with the Regional Transportation Council on implementing the Genesee Street Project, a complete redesign of sidewalks and streetscape from Bailey to the city line, the first such project on the East Side in thirty years. “Our goal is to organize citizens to have a voice in their communities,

to see themselves in a different light, and to see that change is possible if they take a stand and engage the issues,” says Freeland.

Another crucial perspective is that of George Holt, Chairman of the Erie County Legislature and a legislator representing the city of Buffalo. Chairman Holt had praise for the Mayor’s initiative in pursuing strategic planning and pushing for the Queen City Hub, the award-winning design for downtown. But Holt also had some ideas for where the city needs to focus next. “I commend the Mayor for the strategic plan he championed for downtown development, for housing and entertainment...But in terms of the state of the city, we have a long way to go.”

Holt emphasizes that there is much more to the city than the downtown corridor currently in its renaissance. “It’s great to develop commercial districts, but we need to invest in neighborhoods around those commercial strips in order for those businesses to be successful,” he says. Holt says investing in commercial without building housing stock and helping homeowners to rehab and revitalize their neighborhoods is putting the cart before the horse. “We need to focus on reducing crime and creating safe neighborhoods that people can be proud to maintain. We need to focus on decayed areas. There are some streets on the East Side that look like Beirut. Demolitions are part of the solution, but you have to have a plan to rebuild as well.”

And of course, since most of the Mayor’s address was made up of a list of new developments, we need to check in with the developers and see what their view is of the state of the city. From what the Mayor had to say, it seems they are pretty bullish on Buffalo. One new developer on the scene is Eran Epstein, a UB grad who returned to Buffalo after a stint in New York City doing, among other things, real estate development. Epstein bought a house in University Heights as a UB sophomore, and hasn’t looked back since. When housing values went down in that area and Epstein would have taken a bath on the property had he sold it, he did the only thing an entrepreneur can do—The Donald would be proud—and bought more properties.

Currently, Epstein has two major projects in the works. He is turning the old Holling Press building on Washington Street into eighty-two mid-range apartments that will open by April, and shortly after he will begin construction in a building at the corner of Broadway and Fillmore, turning it into forty units for seniors, in an area he says has been “seriously neglected.”

As for his take on the city, Epstein says he definitely sees good things going on here. “There are positive changes going on in Buffalo over the last few years, real changes as well as perceptual changes, which maybe are more important. People aren’t just talking about doing things anymore; now there are serious dollars to back up the talk.”

So there you have it; the state of the city. Maybe there is cause for some self-congratulatory optimism. But rather than breaking our arms patting ourselves on the backs, we should probably be rolling up our sleeves. Now that we’ve finally figured out how to do it, seems like it’s time to get to work.

Anna Hausmann is an editorial consultant for David Laurence Publications.

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